DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 474 471 FL 027 611

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TITLE	Learner Diary Research with "Cambridge" Examination Candidates.
PUB DATE	2003-00-00
NOTE	21p.; In: Edinburgh Working Papers in Applied Linguistics, 2003; see FL 027 607.
PUB TYPE	Journal Articles (080) -- Reports - Research (143)
JOURNAL CIT	Edinburgh Working Papers in Applied Linguistics; n12 p45-63 2003
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*English (Second Language); Higher Education; *Journal Writing; *Language Proficiency; Reading Skills; Second Language Learning; *Student Journals
IDENTIFIERS	*Cambridge English Examinations; Reflective Thinking

ABSTRACT

This paper describes a research project in which volunteers, self-selected from IALS students preparing for one or more of the Cambridge English Examinations, kept journals. Following guidelines, they reflected on their in-class and outside-of-class experiences in the 8 weeks leading up to the exams. They also attended four biweekly meetings with researchers. Study data included the journals, audiotapes of the meetings, and coding sheets that coded information from the meetings. Results highlighted the inadequacy of the notions of "anxiety" and "strategy," which are commonly used by journal researchers. Overall, the students had thought quite a bit about at least some of the issues relating to their learning. They were actively reviewing their behavior; analyzing their strengths, weaknesses, and preferences; and making principled choices. They were all articulate and self-aware, and they were not in need of life-changing advice. (Contains 23 references.) (SM)

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LEARNER DIARY RESEARCH WITH 'CAMBRIDGE' EXAMINATION CANDIDATES

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LEARNER DIARY RESEARCH WITH 'CAMBRIDGE' EXAMINATION CANDIDATES

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Abstract

This article explores the life-worlds of three students preparing for the 'Cambridge' examinations as revealed in their diaries. It reveals three very rich complexes of attitudes and emotions, not easy to summarise, but one recurrent impression is the inadequacy of the notions of 'anxiety' and 'strategy' as commonly used by diary researchers. The informants are all articulate and self-aware, and not in need of 'life-changing' advice.

1. Introduction

This paper describes part of a research project in which volunteers, self-selected from IALS students preparing for one or more of the 'Cambridge' examinations – Cambridge Proficiency in English (CPE), Cambridge Advanced English (CAE), or First Certificate in English (FCE) – kept diaries, following guidelines provided by the researchers, reflecting on their in-class and out-of-class experiences (and problems/questions) in the 8 weeks leading up to the exams, and also attended 4 meetings with the researchers, at 2-weekly intervals, with an open agenda allowing amplification of diary entries, discussion of questions or problems, and giving and asking for advice. The resulting data consists of the diaries themselves, audio-tapes of the four meetings, and 'coding sheets' containing detailed summaries (based on the recordings) and classification of everything said at the meetings. The main aims were to help the participating students, to assist the researchers in conducting their classes and giving out-of-class advice, to provide suggestions for future students, and to illuminate in a (tentatively) generalisable way the behaviour of students preparing for exams, including (very tentatively) possible differences between more and less successful students. The present article discusses only the diaries; the meetings will be reported separately but require mention here because, as will be seen, the diarists themselves cross-refer.

2. Literature review I: diary research

Kathleen Bailey (e.g. Bailey 1983) is the name most associated with diary studies in foreign language learning. In Allwright and Bailey (1991) pp. 171-184, she does not really explain the methodology of diary studies, but instead presents results, largely in anecdotal form, from herself and fellow linguists, under the headings of receptivity, anxiety, competitiveness, self-esteem, parent-child-adult roles in the classroom, and motivation. Some of the salient points made were as follows:

1. John Schumann reported himself as being 'unreceptive' on a course in which he was forced to participate actively; he wanted to 'eavesdrop', and learn in his own way. Francine Schumann was similarly 'unreceptive' to self-instruction materials and preferred learning from story books for native speakers.

2. Many diarists report anxiety, which can in moderation be 'facilitating' but is often 'debilitating'. Bailey suggests that language learning is inherently likely to produce anxiety

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because, for example, one can't avoid making mistakes and displaying incompetence on many levels, normal mechanisms for help are not available, and one's personality is inevitably partly hidden or distorted: 'language shock' can be compared to schizophrenia. Even speaking too well can cause problems with one's peer-group.

3. The Schumanns, and others, sometimes found themselves becoming childishly competitive, leading in turn to frustration and reduced effort.

4. Heyde's work suggests a connection between poor language performance and low self-esteem, though it is unclear which, if either, is the cause, which the effect. Also, even innocent behaviour like asking someone to repeat can be a 'put-down' or blow to self-esteem.

5. Ideas from (or explicable in terms of) transactional analysis (Harris 1967), especially 'learner as child, adult or parent', occur independently in many diaries.

6. Learners with integrative motivation tend to be more active in class, but there is no clear evidence that they learn better.

Although Bailey's work (and her reports of others' work) on diaries have been very enriching for the language teaching profession, there are problems if one tries to use it directly to inform one's research. The best known diary evidence is actually in the form of 'journals' produced by language-teaching professionals, all unusually sophisticated, articulate etc. Teachers who ask their learners to write diaries, or even write their own, are very likely to be disappointed and think they have done something wrong. Moreover, Bailey and her colleagues do not, at least in their most widely available work, give detailed guidelines for setting up diary research and coping with the many problems and issues arising. Perhaps for this reason, there have been thousands of small diary studies, many at master's dissertation or similar level, which suffer from serious design weaknesses: many of these studies are imitative, repetitive, of doubtful validity and not very illuminating.

Parkinson and Howell-Richardson 1989 (henceforth PH89), and Howell-Richardson and Parkinson 1988 (henceforth HP88), reported earlier IALS diary research. PH89, like Bailey, found plentiful examples of anxiety and other apparently dysfunctional feelings and behaviours:

'Am I studying wrong?' (p.132)
'Other students can listen and reading better than me.' (p.131)
'When it's difficult to speak, I isolate myself.' (p.132)
'I feel angry at myself, when I stick at easy situations.' (p.132)

There were also many other kinds of comments, including praise of teachers, requests for changes in teaching, resolutions to act differently or do better, reports of success and helpful advice for posterity:

'(The teacher) is interested in our progress.' (p.131)
'I am very "weak" in grammar, what I don't think we pay much attention on it' (p.131)
'I have to try go out' (p.32)
'I covered the subtitles. It's amazing how much you can concentrate hard if you need to.' (p.131)
'I advocate the use of rehearsal aloud with as critical an ear as possible.' (p.132)

The companion article (HP88) was, however, quite critical of typical diary study methodology, including our own, and suggested that there were often problems of ethics and validity due to tension and confusion between the various possible purposes of diaries, which we listed as follows:

a) to identify and attempt to allay debilitating anxiety;
b) to offer advice on specific learning difficulties;
c) to provide a basis for counselling in individualised study techniques;
d) to provide a basis for formative feedback on independent project work;
e) to encourage learners to assess their own performance in specific linguistic areas and self-prescribe remedial action;
f) to encourage similar self-analysis and action in relation to target language behaviour, especially in out-of-class activities (e.g. maximising native-speaker contact).

(HP88:75)

After criticising the confusion of purposes in our own studies, we concluded as follows:

> Diary studies can be immensely useful for pedagogical purposes, for course evaluation and for basic research. Even our own study, which was in many ways badly thought out and executed, yielded clear benefits in all three areas, and, most important, was considered worthwhile and even enjoyable to varying extents by most of those who participated. Nonetheless, we are far more cautious about diaries now than when we started the project. We feel that the recent enthusiasm for diaries within the profession, sparked off it seems mainly by works such as Bailey 1983 in which professional language teachers reflect on their own anxieties in going back to the classroom, has been rather excessive. 'Ordinary' FL students cannot be expected to show the same enthusiasm for diaries unless there is 'something in it for them'. This means careful planning, for without such planning the result will be, from the research/evaluation perspective, no usable data, and, from the pedagogic perspective, disruption and disappointment.
>
> In particular, the attraction of anxiety-based explanations for student problems can lead to simplistic analysis, and to teachers/researchers 'playing at psychology' in a way which may be positively harmful.
>
> Anxiety does not feature on our list of predictor variables, which does not mean that it should be ignored – we have probably simply failed to identify and sub-categorise it well enough – but rather that it interacts with a range of more mundane factors which we may be professionally better equipped to do something about.
>
> (HP88: 79)

These criticisms have not really been answered, and it would seem that since 1988 academic work on learner diaries has moved forward very little. In the more prestigious journals, articles on diaries are now mostly about teacher diaries, or 'logs' kept by teacher 'trainees', or occasionally, in the Schumann tradition, teacher as learners (Ahrens 1993). Local journals and working papers do sometimes contain competent but anecdotal reports of small-scale experiments which teachers and learners seem to have enjoyed, but attempts to demonstrate something more substantial have been few and unconvincing.

One example must suffice. Halbach (2000) is among many writers hoping to use diaries as a window on 'strategy' use, and she claims that her better students were more able to respond to learner training and increased the range of strategies used, thus moving even further ahead of weaker classmates. In her penultimate paragraph, pessimistically but reasonably, she argues that her data support Cummings' (1981) view that:

> there exists a threshold level of proficiency in the L2 below which strategy acquisition is not possible. If this, as it seems, is the case with the weaker students, we are facing a vicious circle: weaker students do not have enough strategies to help them with language learning, but at the same time, they are not proficient enough to benefit from strategy training, since they cannot use these strategies in their L2. This, in turn, means that they will not be able to speed up their learning with the help of their strategies.
>
> (p.93)

But the article continues and concludes somewhat lamely:

> Unfortunately, this issue leads us too far at this stage, but further work is needed to find out whether a threshold level like this really exists.
>
> What does become apparent is the need for strategy training in specific areas. We have seen that weaker students seem to lack a critical self-awareness (i.e. the strategies of self-monitoring and self-evaluation), while successful students have developed these together with the abilities to take advantage of any learning situation, to use all available resources and to select appropriate follow-up activities to deal with their problems. It could thus be that an effective learner-training, at least with the type of student that took part in this study, needs to focus especially on these aspects. Again, space prevents me from going into further detail, but it might be worth pursuing this line of research further.
>
> (ibid.)

This comes close to a non-sequitur, and there is also cause for concern when one looks back to find the kind of evidence on which Halbach's conclusions are based. It seems to consist of diary entries such as the following, presumably from two different students (pp. 86-87):

Date and Activity	**Problem**	**Follow-up**
20 February 1996 Reading *The Scarlet Letter*	I have had problems when I have started reading the novel My problem deals with the vocabulary of the novel because it is a little difficult to understand.	Firstly, I am going to try to pay more attention to what I am reading. Secondly, I am going to look for some indispensable words in the dictionary.

Date	**Activity**	**Problems**	**Follow-up**
7.5.96	Reading Making syntax essays.	I have not had any problems with the resolutions of the exercises to make the essays.	

Like many diary researchers, Halbach is aware of some threats to the validity of her research, especially that the better students simply write more, but seems less aware of others, especially of 'normative responses', the tendency of respondents to say what they think researchers are looking for. One might wonder if the informants of Halbach and some other diary researchers are not perhaps thinking in effect: "You want anxiety? We'll give you anxiety! You want more strategies? We'll give you more strategies!" This might have been mitigated by a more (loosely) ethnographic approach, keeping more of the students' 'own voices'.

3. Literature Review II – other areas

Another set of influences on our research may be summed up by the slogan 'diary as dialogue'. It is now widely recognised that all research which depends upon written responses engages the respondent in a kind of dialogue with the 'implied reader', usually identical with the question setter, involving unspoken questions such as 'What do they mean?' 'What do they want?' 'What will they think of me?' As Low (1991) points out, even an anonymous postal questionnaire, superficially much less personal than a diary, inevitably has this dialogic and interpersonal dimension; the researchers cannot eliminate it, and can only seek to make the questionnaire as valid as possible, incorporating or simulating features of a good conversation, such as offering personal introductions and links, 'giving (psychological)

rewards for answer', and 'coming out of frame' (e.g. by 'chatting'). In our own research the dialogic/interpersonal dimension is, if not greater, at least more overt, due to at least three factors: the inherent difference between diaries and questionnaires, the fact that diary writing went hand-in-hand with meetings (see below), and the fact that the researchers also taught and talked to the subjects extensively almost every day. For these reasons, it seemed sensible to regard diary entries, not as 'mere' units of information, but as moves in a conversational game, having many functions beside the 'merely' informative and to be taken, not with a pinch of salt, but as part of a wider picture, even as a 'continuation of the meetings by other means'. This meant that we should seek to be aware of as many perspectives as possible from discourse analysis (DA), conversational analysis (CA), interaction analysis (IA), L2 pragmatic development and the various schools of ethnography and ethnomethodology, especially Mehan (e.g. 1979), Erickson (e.g. 1982) and Cazden (e.g. 1988). To incorporate all these perspectives in one study would be impractical, but they have influenced in a general way our choice of analytical procedures and categories, as well as providing anecdotal material which illuminated our data: in the case of L2 pragmatic development, for example, Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford's (1991:47f) account (reproduced in part in Kasper 2001: 507-8) of an East Asian student, asking endless repetitive questions to avoid a single 'impolite' statement, is certainly not identical to, but helps understanding of, some of the behaviour encountered in the group meetings, and possibly some diary entries too.

The third and final research tradition of major importance for this study is action research (hereafter AR). Lewin (1946) appears to be the seminal paper, and Elliott and Adelman (1976) and Stenhouse (1975 (in part) and 1979) are perhaps the best-known early works, whilst Hopkins (1993: 44) offers a good short survey of other early writers plus five(!) definitions of AR. Although Parkinson et al. (1981) describes itself (p.11) as "closely related to the type of work known as 'action research'", AR became well known in Applied Linguistics and FLT circles only much later, mainly through the work of Allwright (e.g. Allwright and Bailey 1991: 42 ff), and later still through the collection of articles in Edge and Richards (eds.) 1993.

The defining features of AR (in FLT) are that it involves teachers, with or without outside help, researching innovations in their own classroom, and that the primary objective is to achieve the best possible results in this classroom; reporting for an outside audience is important but secondary, and there can be no question of control groups, of continuing something that 'isn't working' or generally using learners as 'guinea pigs'. Kemmis and Henry (1989:2, quoted in Allwright and Bailey 1991:44) define AR as:

> a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out

Strickland (1988:760), again quoted in Allwright and Bailey (ibid.), describes AR as following a series of repeated steps:

> 1) identify an issue, interest or problem; 2) seek knowledge; 3) plan an action; 4) implement the action; 5) observe the action; 6) reflect on your observations; and 7) revise the plan. The cycle then begins once more.

Strictly speaking, our research differed slightly from the AR paradigm as given above, in that we did not plan in advance to do anything new in our teaching, except to give out the diaries and hold the meetings, and to act on information received: the research itself was the innovation. Nevertheless, we feel that our work falls squarely within the AR tradition, much

more than within the other traditions discussed above: our first concern was to help the cohorts of learners writing the diaries, our second to help future cohorts, and only after securing this did we (and do we) seek the generalisability of research reports, which for this kind of research resides not in level of statistical significance but in providing details (Geertz's 'thick description') of our contexts, so that readers who have similar classes can judge for themselves its likely relevance to their context. As Parkinson et al. (1981: 10) explain:

> There is no guarantee that our conclusions are generalisable beyond the context of this particular work. We hope and believe that such generalisation will be possible, but it will consist, not in rigorous statistical demonstration of causality, but in individuals perceiving a possible relevance to their own situation and trying out similar ideas themselves.

4. Procedures and participants

We invited students who were studying for any of the Cambridge examinations to take part in the study. They were asked to keep a diary during the weeks leading up to the exams, in which they recorded anything which they thought interesting or relevant to their English learning in general and preparation for the exam in particular. They were told (in a handout):

> You could write about what happens in your classes (not just the exam preparation class), what you do outside classes, how you feel about your progress, how you feel about English, why you decided to take the exam in the first place... We want to leave it up to you.

The diarists were provided with an empty exercise book, and told they could write as much or as little as they wanted. It was made clear that the diaries would not be completely private; not only would their class teacher (who was also, in each case, one of the researchers) read them and give feedback, but all three researchers would read them prior to our informal lunch-time meetings.

The students handed in their diaries four times during the term, and we had four meetings on the basis of them. Five students chose to participate at the outset, but only three continued for the whole term, so it was decided to focus our discussion of the diaries on those three.

5. Yuko

Yuko (all names have been changed – see acknowledgement) is a Japanese student. She begins her first entry by outlining her reasons for enrolling for the exams: she wanted to be pushed to study, and especially to speak - "I always shrink away from speaking English" - as she knows she *has* to speak in order to pass. She also felt she would be forced to work at grammar, and extend her repertoire of written English *genres*. And she would increase her confidence in her English improvement if she could get "a visible result".

She later reveals her main reason for participating in the research: again, the meetings would afford "good opportunities to force myself to speak English" (whereas the actual writing of the diaries was not something she considered difficult or daunting).

When a fellow-participant voiced a feeling that she was beginning to forget her L1, Yuko said she couldn't imagine that happening to her, but "If I begin to forget Japanese, that will be the time I can admit that my English is good".

About **reading in English**, she says she has increased the amount she reads - the newspaper every Saturday, one simplified book per week - always looking for something which captures her interest - in the hope that this will improve both her "speed of reading and accuracy of understanding". She prefers the *Daily Mail* or *Scotsman*; one day she bought the *Guardian*, but "I couldn't feel any familiarity with its topic and style"; however, it helped her feel sleepy!

She enjoyed reading *The Remains of the Day*, because the story was already familiar to her. In general she enjoys reading books, seeing films, listening to music, and watching TV, and is glad if by doing things she enjoys she can improve her English painlessly, "without being forced and bored".

Regarding the exams, she considers reading to be the least problematic section; despite memory problems, and not understanding everything, she manages (in practice tests) to get enough correct answers to pass, without running out of time.

On the other hand, one classroom activity, consisting of reading an article quickly then telling a partner what they remember, was "one of the most frightening moments for me....It was horrible and I was about to cry". She suggests repeating the activity informally, by choosing an article from a newspaper and telling a friend about it, to overcome this fear; and comforts herself that, in the exam, she will be able to read the texts more than once.

With **writing** one of her perceived problems is gauging style: achieving the required degree of (in)formality ("Maybe I don't understand what is formal"). Another problem, mentioned several times, is timing, though she says that she has difficulties writing to a time limit in Japanese as well. She attributes her problems partly to the time she spends on planning, though she still sometimes deviates from her plan in mid-stream because she thinks of another idea - she ends this section with "I want to be more intelligent".

On one occasion, she reports feeling happy about a poem she wrote in English, in which she included quotes from her favourite songs (particularly by *Queen)* and from a newspaper. She describes her habit of noting down :

> sentences and expressions which I thought "How beautiful it is" or "It must be useful"....I often use these sentences and expressions when I write English. I feel happy when I find a opportunity to use them.

Sometimes she uses new expressions inappropriately, but she recognises that, while receiving many corrections can be a little disheartening, it is necessary to make mistakes in order to learn: "I should make the most of the advantages of making mistakes".

In a later entry, she describes her method of writing a film review: she printed out a review from the Internet before writing her own; she did not copy the original, but "I borrowed some good sentences" and "modelled the structure", to produce, in her own words, "a faintly fine work!" She is still concerned, though, that she repeats words and expressions in her writing due to insufficiently wide vocabulary.

Time is also cited as a problem when she talks about the **Speaking** exam: the issue here is not having time to prepare what she is going to say. "If I can't think of anything to say in the real test, it's a real nightmare". She tells herself that what she needs are "enthusiasm and determination for speaking", and "B. said that silence was an enemy. For me, it's so strong that I hardly knock it down". She explains why she asked for Asian partners in the Speaking exam: she feels inhibited by the fluency of European students ("I often feel as if I'm pressed to speak

fast"), and she finds European pronunciation hard to understand (while acknowledging that her own pronunciation is Japanese).

She reports on having to make a 30-second speech in class, after having time to plan; contrary to her teacher's instructions, she wrote complete sentences rather than notes; while acknowledging "I know this is a bad thing", it enables her to speak without hesitation.

Doing a speaking practice with her exam partner, she found she was able to start talking fairly quickly. "I finally understood that I have to throw my disgrace away". Watching the Cambridge video of a Speaking exam was useful, as it gave her an idea of what the exam was like. During a speaking practice in class, she had difficulty "finding an opportunity to insert my words into someone's speaking. Even when I want to speak, if my partners look like going on their words, I tend to wait time for them to finish". She concludes with a graphic impression of the stressfulness of speaking a foreign language:

> Communicating in English is tiring. I have to listen to others and understand what they said. I also have to think about my answer and English sentences. I have to do these things endlessly during conversation. I can't have a rest and others don't wait. This is the difference between writing and speaking.

In **listening** she considers her ability to be poor, though she is not sure of the reasons; she says, for example, that when note-taking she takes down less important points rather than main points; "I want to exchange my ears to native speakers!" She does, however, report some successes. She is pleased that she understood much of what was said when she went on a guided tour of Glasgow Art School. On another occasion, her disappointment when Italy (her favourite team) lost a football match is counterbalanced by her pleasure at having understood the news, as, when she first arrived, she couldn't understand the radio at all. She took both of these events as indications that her listening skill had improved.

> Maybe the more I listen to English, the better my listening becomes. However, how long will it take me to listen to English correctly???

Regarding the Listening exam, she reports one of her problems is with spelling; and while she thinks about the spelling, she loses the thread of the tape. She is worried that the coursebook texts seem fairly easy, so decides to try an actual practice test, and finds it very difficult.

She reports on communication problems outside the classroom, when buying a baked potato, or renting a video; when she doesn't understand, she says "yes" or "no", and the transaction is sometimes successful. Another time, she has difficulties understanding a local person who delivered a parcel; this reinforces her feeling that she is not integrated:

> I'm living in Edinburgh but I'm studying English in an isolated world...I don't even try to jump into the real world. My motivation is not enough strong to take a risk. However, I will be satisfied if I get good results in examinations.

She describes how her vocabulary learning strategies have changed: she used to "scrawl" words in her textbooks and notebooks and fail to revise them; (here, she notes wryly that "There must be a proper reason for everything happening in the world"). Now, however, she has a dedicated vocabulary notebook, and revises at weekends. She reflects on how to decide which of the many new words she meets she has to remember for exam purposes. "I know I have to learn some formal words, but which ones? I know I have to study phrasal verbs, but which ones?" She also regrets her inability to remember collocations.

Working towards the **English in Use** paper, even at FCE level, makes her "suspicious of my knowledge of English"; elsewhere, she says she is "suffering from English in Use", and later again exclaims "If only there wasn't Use of English in Cambridge exams". She says she frequently makes mistakes with articles and prepositions, which are among the grammatical areas tested in Part 3. She believes that prepositions should be learned alongside the verbs and nouns they co-occur with, but that with articles the only remedy is practice, as she has learned the actual rules many times over; "I've made such many mistakes that I've been sick of them". She also describes her difficulties with the Word Formation section: "At first, I really had no idea, so I was like a person who was frozen". Nevertheless, she concludes on a somewhat positive note: "My road to the Cambridge exams is full of difficulty... However...I should tackle my problems rather than cry over the lack of English ability". After a conversation with a flatmate who had passed FCE previously, she resolves to "work on practice tests over and over again".

On dictionary use she recalls that a teacher has advised her against using a Japanese-English dictionary, and her reaction is "Although I really trust him, I'm opposed to this advise"; however, she recognises the inherent problems, and uses a monolingual dictionary to check. "Japanese-English dictionary and English-English dictionary are the best friends of my English study"; she has given up using an English-Japanese dictionary.

On the subject of **her mother tongue**, she describes the problem of translating everything she hears and reads into Japanese. Later, she reflects about Japanese characters, and the fact that Japanese people do not normally use Romaji (Roman) script when writing, and find it hard to read texts written in Romaji ; she wonders whether not being used to dealing with an alphabet could contribute to her inability to read fast in English, and to her problems with writing in English. On a later occasion, she comments on how interesting it is for her to see British audiences' reactions to Japanese films; she laughs when they don't, and vice versa. She listens to the dialogue while reading the sub-titles, but feels that the latter don't capture the original accurately; "I feel there's a nuance between the sub-titles and the dialogue". This leads her to wonder if it is possible for her to "express all of what I think in Japanese in English".

She concludes one instalment with admiration for friends of hers who socialise more and who are now going to do voluntary work, "While I am still standing on the same as where I started, they are running far ahead of me". She perceives them as making more progress in listening and speaking, while she stays at home with radio and books; "That's my style, but I need to change it temporarily and force to speak English....This page seems rather the words for counsellors than learning diary!!"

One day in particular, she reports feeling good, and being able to speak a lot in class because she felt like speaking. "I wish every day would be like today". She says she feels down easily, and this makes her "irresponsible" and "irritated by myself", especially before exams. However, she says "I can get rid of irritation by my own way (because I've been with my personality for 25 years!!) and my friends always help me". She goes on to say how helpful it is for her to keep a diary, in which she can express the thoughts she finds it difficult to express verbally. "I'm not confident that my diary is useful for your research but it is definitely useful for me".

On another positive day, it occurs to her that so many of the things she has been doing here are things that she had never or rarely done in Japan:

> Have I ever written letters of complaint? No. Have I ever written reviews or articles? No! Have I ever written compositions about controversial issues? Never!! Have I understood all articles on newspapers

> in Japanese? Definitely no!!... Today's conclusion is: I don't need to be so depressed if I can't write well and understand quickly!!

She also reports two enjoyable social occasions at other students' houses - something she tends to avoid because of her fear of communicating; "But communicating is enjoyable, isn't it?... everybody helps me.... I'm really lucky being surrounded by nice people! Because of them I can prevent myself from dropping out of studying here".

Regarding **the research meetings**, she begins her second instalment by saying that she found the first meeting stressful but good, because the participants could exchange problems, opinions, and solutions. In her last instalment, she apologises for not answering questions properly in the meeting; "I need longer time to start speaking and, while speaking, often loss my word". She feels "down and irritable", thinking about how long she has been studying English, and comparing herself with other students. "Unfortunately, I seem to like comparing and always want anything I don't have but others have"; "I need longer time to get my ideas in shape". She feels "childish", lacking in intelligence and opinions. "I've been struggling with not only English but also the difference in the way of thinking or education, that is, maybe, the difference in culture". She sometimes does feel good, but it is only temporary.

Her comments about the exam class are positive - it is "really suitable", she can keep up with the class "except speaking"; she also explains why she changed to a lower level class at another time of day: because she found the class she was in too difficult, and she does not agree that the challenge of a higher level class is good, at least for herself: "I am not the kind of person who can work furiously and never give up".

On **tests:** before sitting the FCE and CAE, she took the IELTS test for the second time, and found it less tiring because she knew what to expect. However, time constraints - the need to work quickly in exam conditions - still have a negative effect on her: "I become impatient and can't work calmly.... I need more time to do anything than others need". She couldn't face classes after receiving the results. To express her disappointment with her results, she quotes the words of a favourite song:

> I get up and die a little, I got no feel and no rhythm, I just keep losing my beat!

Instead, she spent the morning thinking about the positive parts (improved scores in Listening and Reading). Later in the day she went to see a subtitled film, which she enjoyed - "I think it's important to do something just for a change. I'm sorry I became too emotionally today".

Two days before the FCE/CAE exams, she says:

> My irritation exploded finally. I threw my textbook against the wall, flung my dictionary against the floor and sobbed for nearly one hour. It is usual for me before examination. It's really good to have a good long cry. I feel refreshed and feel like smiling wryly at my foolishness.

And on the eve of the exam she writes, "Give up. Give up! Give up!!" She had thought she might have stood a chance of passing the CAE, but now she felt that even passing the FCE was an unrealistic goal. She decided to do a little studying, but above all to get a good sleep.

However, on the day of the FCE, she did not feel nervous. She finished the reading paper in good time but, as she revised, started to feel that "every answer was wrong". She also managed to finish the Writing paper, but "the problem is quality, task achievement". The Use

of English seemed a little easier than the practice papers, but still "I'm not confident of my answers".

She is sure she has failed the CAE. She couldn't concentrate during the Reading paper (she feels the biggest difference in level of difficulty between the two exams lies in this paper). She finished the Writing paper in time, but worried again about "task achievement", as she didn't organise it well; she was, however, pleased to find that a job application letter was one of the options, as that was the task she felt more confident about when revising. "As for English in Use, I wrote down something without certainty." Despite her prognosis, she says she is not depressed, and will recover quickly from feeling down when she receives the result. "I have got used to failing exams."

In her penultimate entry, she summarises **how she prepared for the exams**. Speaking: "I'm ashamed that I haven't made any efforts for speaking. I, however, try to start speaking as quickly as I can". Reading: tips given in class were useful, and doing practice tests; ultimately each student has to "find one's own way, that is most suitable way, by themselves". Also "I learned that depending on my feeling or intuition too much is extremely dangerous!!" Writing: there is a "pattern" for each *genre*, so she studied the structure of each and memorised often-used phrases; simply practising a lot is less important than looking at corrections and learning from mistakes. Listening: her recent strategy is to read the questions rather than listening to instructions, otherwise the tape starts before she has finished reading. Use of English: she should have built her vocabulary more and memorised words together with prepositions; "I couldn't overcome my laziness"; "looking back upon my preparation is good because I can find out what was lacked. However, I'd like to forget about exams for a while."

In the final entry, she reflects on her English learning in general: she feels she has done her best, in most areas except speaking; "in order to improve speaking, I have to be more interested in people". She has listened and read a lot, and "written many tasks. Considering that I rarely wrote something in English before I came here, the number of my writing tasks is amazing!!" Studying in Edinburgh has been "the greatest experience I've ever had".

"I'm proud of keeping diary every day. I think that I did my minimum duty.... Thank you for reading my diary and giving me useful advice. Thank you!!"

6. Sandrine

Sandrine, a Swiss student, says in her first entry that she is generally happy with her progress. She now understands people better, for instance. She says her classes at IALS are useful, providing a basis for independent work later in the day. As an example, she mentions typing up work already corrected by the teacher as a useful activity: "it's a good way of making the best of the bit that's already been done". She doesn't want to concentrate too much on exam practice, which is not her prime goal.

She cites **reading** as her preferred activity: newspapers and fiction. At the beginning of the study, she is reading a book of short stories; she claims to be a slow reader, and hasn't yet read a complete novel in English. However, by the second instalment, she has bought and read *The Accidental Tourist* by Anne Taylor, one of the set texts for the Proficiency exam, which gives her a sense of achievement, as does subsequently watching and understanding the film adaptation.

Later, she describes reading another novel, *A Patchwork World* by the same author, which she finds interesting from the language point of view, as it contains a great deal of slang and colloquial language. And she reports that her class have started reading *Dr Fischer from Geneva or the Bomb Party*, which she is finding hard to put down, so it's a "very good choice of reading".

On **speaking,** she feels she still has problems finding the right words "on the spot". She wishes she could express herself more effectively:

> The more time goes, the more I realise that one can't speak just to practise his/her English. Above all, one speaks to communicate, to express feelings, opinions and ideas. That implies a whole relational context that often lacks here. Knowing people better, as well as learning a language, demands patience and a lot of time. That's not always easy to accept.

To improve her speaking ability, she seeks opportunities to talk to native speakers, for example her host family and language exchange partners, which she also regards as a way of learning more about Edinburgh life and culture. She describes a visit to the cinema with a native speaker friend, and the discussion they had afterwards, noting that they "share a passion for words. She likes to explain meanings, to compare different ways of expressing things, so that we often end up speaking about the language more than just getting ideas across." She reflects on whether she appreciates different qualities in an English speaker than in a French speaker; "Perhaps it makes me discover other personalities, new characters".

She decides to seek a work placement for the summer, and describes two interviews which she attended. In the first, one of the interviewers was French but spoke excellent though accented English, which made her think that "after all, it's not impossible"; she liked the people and work atmosphere, and she felt the job would give her plenty of opportunity to speak English "specially on the phone (which is horrible but useful). In the second she met "a saint", an artist who runs an art centre in a very deprived area; she concludes "the placement would have been a rich human experience.... but, finally, I chose the first one".

Regarding **listening**, she doesn't often watch TV, preferring to listen to the radio, which she switches on the minute she wakes up. She also likes cinema, and often goes to see a film. However, she describes one rather disappointing experience of watching a TV film in American English with a lot of slang, which she found difficult to understand.

For **vocabulary**, she copies out words that she has learnt during a lesson into a special vocabulary notebook. She selects the words she wants to remember, but says that she has to hear, read and write a word over and over in different contexts before she can remember it - and even then "remember it still doesn't mean using it when I speak". She feels that context is crucial here:

> For example, we learn a new word during a lesson and I write it down. In my mind, its meaning is associated to that context. Then, if I hear it again, on the radio or TV or in a conversation, I'm able to broaden the meaning, to feel it better, and to precise my first definition.

She talks about the similarity between many English words and their French or Italian equivalents, causing them to sound familiar, but reflects that this similarity is only helpful for understanding, not for production; and she gives an example of a false friend (*proprement*)... "so it helps in a way to have similar sounds/ words in my mother tongue, but its also an illusion".

In her last instalment, written after the exams, she says her current feeling is that "it's hard for me to absorb new things"; she often looks up something which is "not unknown but not known either, they are in a sort of limbo-space - in-between words", only to realise she has looked it up already several times. She recalls previously being more systematic about writing down and memorising new words, but now she just goes on,

> like you would do amid people you don't really want to speak to. You avoid them, or wave discreetly, pretending you're late... Yes, it's a kind of diplomatic and uncomfortable relationship at the moment. I guess patience is the only remedy.

She often refers to her knowledge of German; in the first entry, she talks about how it seems to be declining, while admitting that she thinks learning more than one foreign language helps the acquisition of other languages, partly simply because of the similarity of certain words, but also because the whole process is not new.

> I've already experienced the feeling of despair you get when you're faced to a foreign language. This horrible feeling that things lose their substance when you tell them in that language. ... Or even ... simple issues, like speaking about personal things, getting closer to people.... The relationships seem not to change, not to deepen, like fruits which remain unripe.

She expresses a worry that once she returns home, her English knowledge will "shrink to a more or less superficial knowledge", as has happened with her German - in German, she now feels "lost for words" just writing a letter to a friend.

She looks forward to a visit from her boyfriend, and thinks it will be nice to speak French; then finds she sometimes finds herself translating from English.

> For example, I can't find any appropriate word for ..."to enjoy". In English you "enjoy" everything, whereas in French you would use different words to express it, depending on the context.

Regarding **exam preparation**, she confesses in her second instalment to not having done a lot of work specifically for the exam, but intends to do more as the deadline approaches. Generally, she prefers the CPE tasks to the CAE ones, finding them "less superficial, less based on speed"; although she comments that some of the tasks - the gap-filling part of the Reading paper and the Use of English - give her "the feeling of being trapped: either I know or I don't, nothing to really think about".

In the event, when she sat the exams, she found that (as she expected) neither CAE nor CPE were easy. The CAE reading paper was "a complete stress" which put her off her stride for the next two papers. The CPE Use of English was hard, particularly the section involving reformulating sentences, as sometimes "even the ones which were familiar to me were difficult because I couldn't remember the exact use".

She begins her last instalment by saying that although it has been quite a busy week "I from far prefer that to being idle and hanging about". The term is nearly over, and she describes her dislike of the "end atmosphere", when

> everyone wants to go back to his/her country, everyone is fed up. It resembles an after-party atmosphere, when people leave one after the other, the men have untightened their ties and the make-up of the girls is faded. Personally, I'm bad at ... in-between moments...

She also reports feeling a mixture of apprehension and pleasure at going home.

She concludes by talking about her life in Scotland, saying that one of the difficult aspects is having to adapt, "to find a way of life that suits you". Although it is temporary, you establish new habits and relationships, while keeping up with your life at home, in the knowledge that you will return eventually. Without her Swiss boyfriend keeping her up-to-date with news from home, she says, she might have felt in "a kind of ... no-woman's land".

7. Haruo

Haruo, a Japanese student, dwells a lot on his perceived difficulties in several areas.

Concerning his perceived lack of **reading** ability, he thinks he might tend to "recognise author's exaggeration and metaphoric ideas as the main idea". He believes he would do the same in Japanese, and recalls the advice of his mother, a Japanese mother-tongue teacher, to "read as many books as possible.... I think that what she said to me is the fastest way ... to be good at reading".

He more than once expresses his worries about his speed when reading for gist, when doing a paragraph re-ordering task for example, though later in the same entry he describes being able to "get the main idea" in a limited time. He suspects that he may also lack this ability to read quickly for gist when reading in Japanese. He is concerned that his nervousness will impede his ability to deal with "tricky" multiple choice questions in the exam. "The key to success in reading section is how I can prevent myself from feeling upset." "I have no alternative but to reading as many articles as I could and to understand as much as possible".

He describes the same class activity described above by Yuko, that of reading an article and describing it to a partner. He feels he performed the task well as the passage was fairly easy, but worries a little that, when guessing meaning from context where it is expressed metaphorically, he adds too much of his own interpretation: "I tend to create the picture of the passage by myself"; something which he feels must be avoided in the exam.

He says in his final instalment, however, that reading is what he spends most time on, believing it to be the most "useful and beneficial" activity, "the most indispensable practice"; he goes on to list the advantages: "a variety of vocabulary", "models of good sentences", "information"; you have to "encounter good sentences if you would like to sophisticate your writing". He needs, however, "extraordinary patience" to look up every new word in the dictionary, which can be "overwhelming and exhausting"; however, if he is feeling motivated, he can enjoy reading for hours.

In **Writing,** he describes his problems with formality: he has little difficulty identifying whether a sample of writing is formal or informal, but does have problems when it comes to production. He plans to learn sets of formal phrases with their informal equivalents. Another writing problem he describes is:

> While rewriting, I noticed that the majority of my mistakes had occurred in the process of translating my idea in Japanese into the statement in English. Some of them are grammatically correct but they sound odd..... also...the usage of vocabulary is tough to manage and I am occasionally perplexed on what word I should choose so that the sentence can definitely represent my thought..... (I think) that I cannot write anything without translation in my mind.

In his last instalment, he describes how disheartening it is when a teacher corrects as "unclear or meaningless" a sentence which he had thought was "logical and clear in meaning" and which he had "made with a bit of confidence". He says he is always struggling to make his

writing readable, despite everything he has learnt about writing; "it is much easier said than done to try to use the accumulated knowledge consciously in an appropriate situation; it is easy to input, but very difficult to output."

On **listening,** he talks about the relative difficulty of understanding certain speakers, even when they are saying words that he knows, and wonders whether it is solely due to accent, intonation or whether there are other factors involved. Later he describes seeing a video in class regarding differences between Scottish and English, which amazed him; although he had realised there were differences, he now understood that "Scottish and English were totally different languages". He felt he could understand why he had been finding it so difficult to understand people, and says "I have to enhance my Scottish vocabulary to have conversation with elder Scots people."

Regarding the Listening exam, he notes a problem with losing concentration, leading him to miss some of the answers. He talks about the need to guess what people are saying, but to balance this - "I noticed ... that I might expand my guesses too much... and this could lead me to make some mistakes. I found it a really nasty habit..." Later he describes how, when simultaneously listening for understanding and looking at the questions, the latter distracts him from listening. Then, once he loses concentration, "the situation is in chaos". He reflects on the idea that the strategy and tactics needed to pass exams are separate from language ability, and wonders if he can acquire the necessary skills to listen and answer simultaneously.

On **speaking,** he discusses his tendency to think in Japanese first when speaking in English. "I have to think of everything I am going to say before beginning to speak. Some might suggest I ought to think everything in English, and convert my Japanese brain tissue into English...," but this is not easy. Several entries relate to an evening class in anthropology where he is the only non-native speaker: he reports being "almost dumb when having a discussion", whilst his classmates are talkative and don't require time to think, so "I am sort of helpless in the class." A week later he promises himself that he will say something, and manages to do so; this required extensive mental preparation, but he felt he had achieved his aim.

He worries about how much his confidence in his spoken English fluctuates; "when I could make myself understood when explaining difficult matters, I could easily become confident and seem to have my study going well; however, this is always vice versa"; "I have been struggling to have my self-confidence back since I have nearly lost it with my study". He describes how much easier it is to speak to one interlocutor than to more than one; the other person will wait for him to express his thoughts, whereas if he is the third party to the conversation, the other two can talk to each other and he can be excluded. Regarding the Speaking exam, he describes the difficulties he has when dealing with the picture description part: generally maintaining the flow, and specifically dealing with the problem of not recalling an appropriate word, and avoiding silences while thinking. He also reflects on the need to use more "sophisticated" words in order to get a higher mark; his plan is to try to use such words in everyday conversation.

He finds English **grammar** tough, after reviewing future forms in class which he had hitherto felt confident about; he had a similar experience with modal verbs in a later class. He discusses his disappointment at finding the Use of English paper harder than he expected.

He describes his difficulty in providing suitable phrasal verbs, when these do not exist in Japanese, and the seeming impossibility of the task of learning all such verbs in English. He worries here that he "might sound childish when facing difficulties"

In various entries, he reflects on **Japanese culture.** He discusses a reason he has read why Japanese speakers tend not to speak English very well: their obsession with grammar, their fear of making mistakes which inhibits them from speaking - "we find remaining silent better than making silly mistakes in front of others". While acknowledging that not all Japanese learners' difficulties with speaking can be attributed to their education system, "at least it has had a significant influence on ways of our thinking and our present behaviour in class". Later again he reflects on how far Japanese education has influenced his way of learning English; he has realised that there are many ways to learn a language, "some might be practical and efficient... some might be not". He ponders on why some people learn more quickly than others, and concludes that although he would prefer not to think so, it depends on "people's ability, and potential. It seems to me that there is more to it than aspirations."

He also talks about an article about the media (read in class) which shocked him: "the idea that Asian people were losing their own identity because of Western influence through media". He goes on to wonder whether he himself might not be losing his own, Japanese identity; in fact he had not thought much about being Japanese before reading it, but "it is not so easy to be obsessive with our culture as long as Japan has already got soaked with Western culture and we ourselves accept it."

In a later instalment, he talks about Japanese culture and politeness, which leads Japanese people always to be polite when speaking English; they would be polite even to close friends. He feels this makes him "eager to learn English used in formal context rather than one in informal conversation". While he recognises that the CAE exam requires the ability to deal with both formal and informal styles, he says "I have no intention to change my learning style".

As for our **research meetings**, Haruo describes his feelings about the first one in his second instalment - nervousness in anticipation, but then finding it "really beneficial" to share problems about language learning and discuss possible solutions; and it was "fun to have a friendly talk with teachers and other students".

He begins his third instalment with positive comments about the second meeting: "it was a great opportunity for me to express myself, to think about English as a language and above all, to get to know the picture how others are feeling about English." He still, however, feels he has difficulties really expressing what he is thinking in a foreign language; he describes this as a "war against languages":

> every time I express my opinion in English, I cannot do it without feeling that I am struggling with English. If I can connect what I have in mind to English structure spontaneously...my speaking ability will be getting better I suppose"

Finally, the exam: he felt "satisfied to some extent" with the Writing and English in Use, but found the Reading difficult because of time management. About the Speaking test, he reminds himself to "interact and to try to co-operate" with his partner, and to "memorise some useful phrases...to make myself look quite fluent in speaking... and come up with ideas how to prevent myself from being silent..."

8. Summary and conclusions

We were constantly moved and fascinated when reading these diaries - at their depth, their perceptiveness, eloquence, and humour. We felt very privileged at being granted access to these insights into the thoughts and feelings of these students and sharing their moments of despair and revelation. It is difficult further to abridge, and to draw conclusions from, such rich and varied material, but perhaps five general points can be made.

First, all our informants had thought a lot about at least some of the issues relating to their learning, and were actively reviewing their behaviour, analysing their strengths, weaknesses and preferences, and making principled choices. Although we recognise distortions due to the self-selection of the diarists and the consciousness-raising effects of the research, one might tentatively extrapolate and suggest that even 'average' students in 'normal' classes might have a wider and richer view of their learning than researchers sometimes imply.

Second, an outsider label such as 'strategies', though valid as a construct, fails to do justice to the choices made, especially outside the classroom. It is not a case of 'Shall I learn in more different ways?' but of hour-by-hour, moment-by-moment decisions on what, specifically, to do, with the common human struggle to overcome inertia, fears and inhibitions, be open to new experience, balance immediate and deferred pleasure.

Third, 'anxiety' as a construct likewise fails to do justice to what these students experience. It is undoubtedly present, but as part of something wider. Perhaps 'pressure' would be a better word for the variety of cognitive, affective and interpersonal demands on the individual, not all unpleasant, but together making the months leading up to the examination challenging, to say the least. The various losses, of language and of motivation, described most fully by Sandrine, are also an inevitable part of the picture. Also striking, though, were the balancing positive emotions such as hope, sense of achievement, self-discovery, pleasures of friendship and everyday living.

Fourth, whilst it is always tempting for a reader of such diaries to offer simplistic advice – Yuko, for example might be advised to 'get a life', 'go out more' or whatever – such advice is ultimately insensitive and fatuous, fails to respect individual personality and preferences, and goes against what is known about effective counselling. All diarists made such preferences clear in discussion and were certainly not looking for 'life-changing' advice – at the most, they would contemplate short-term surface changes to satisfy examiners. If advice is appropriate at all, it should be in the form of ideas for more things to do in the diarist's own preferred style.

Fifth and last, a comment on the 'truth' of the diaries. Were the diarists writing what they really felt, or were they 'giving us what we wanted', as we suggested above about some other studies? Ultimate truth is of course never demonstrable (though its opposite is sometimes apparent), and the best one can hope for is 'a' truth rather than 'the' truth, representing the informants' beliefs, as formulated for others, but never all their beliefs – see Cohen and Mannion 1994: 274-5, including their summary of Cicourel and Kitwood. With these particular students though, we sometimes sensed a slightly different truth, not just an account for us, but an account for the diarist, a 'finding out what I think', like a Vygotskyan internal monologue (though, of course, also very much in the tradition of 'literary' diaries). Thus Yuko's "Give up!" is certainly a real feeling, but also a move in a (very serious) game with herself, an adventure of the mind.

Acknowledgement: Our warmest thanks go to the three diarists quoted in the study. All have given consent for their diaries to be used. We have respected their wishes in not using their real names.

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21

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